Still Life

By Christopher Highland

"Didn't you used to be someone else?"

"I thought you were dead."

Decades out of the spotlight and I'm led to this. At least they could do their homework. A sea of people chat with themselves, and other guests. Their words blend into one another. Occasionally someone does stop and talks with me, and is genuinely appreciative of me, and me being here, but it doesn't happen as often as I would like it to. No, the other guests have never-ending crowds and lines that greet them, and they don't even have to ask for it. They just have to exist.

I scope out the landscape again, and not one frown or angry face to be seen. Enough of the public has the decency and consideration to wear deodorant, but enough of them do not. Not even an odor forecast would help. I don't know how anyone here can keep a straight face, for any amount of money. Not unless they're Zen masters. I keep expecting someone whose odor wafts off them visually like Pig Pen from the Peanuts, and the security has to refuse them entry; if they're allowed in, they're liable to make everybody faint from sickness. Only the steampunk fans with their gasmasks would be safe.

The smell of beer floats through the air. I'm sure there are reasons why many here are drinking. It can't be to hide any nervousness they might feel toward meeting someone they worship as a god, because it certainly doesn't help their etiquette, let alone their vocabulary or verbal linguistics. If anything, it makes some of them more obnoxious. They might as well hold these conventions in breweries. I doubt their noses could tell the difference.

Thankfully, I've been spared the brunt of drunken clownishness and abrasiveness, but I've been witness to and heard of such victims. I'm surprised some of the guests haven't sprayed mace in some of their eyes, or whipped out a taser, dove over their table, and shocked the assailant, earning a perfect ten by the

judges, and a standing ovation by the guests. If not that, then spontaneous sword fighting or pistols and dawn. Filmed on location and rights pending.

Then there are the truly obsessive fans. The ones who say you mean everything to them; who have changed their lives; know their films by heart; all the behind-the-scenes details. The ones who cry big blubbery tears when they see you, drop to their knees, and profess their undying love for you. They promise to do anything and everything under the stars for you. Of course they're here with their drunken entourage begging for autographs, whether it's on a movie poster, a glossy photo, their chest, or their butt. All this comes from the men.

If only I could get a fraction of that kind of action, then I'd be sitting pretty. At least they don't show pictures of their shrines they have at home. I'd be scared to see some of them. They might have pictures of dead bodies, skulls and candles, organs in jars, mummified or stuffed severed heads. At least they don't act like they want to kidnap any of us; At least not yet. Every now and then, I look at their eyes and the way they move and crowd around, and I wonder.

I wonder if anyone would bat an eye if any of the fans would offer themselves up as a sacrifice. Their organs offered up as a feast, to be enjoyed by the guest, prepared on the spot. Grilled and seasoned, or dipped in chocolate, or candied.

The smell of markers mixes with the other smells as it drifts my way, the way they're frequently, hurriedly used. Pictures and posters autographed legibly or illegibly, while precluded with a personalized message or requested quote from their work. I don't know how any of the guests' hands don't fall off or the marker they use doesn't slip out of their hand and shoot into someone's eye, all the while trying to write a complicated, elongated, hyphenated name.

At least they could give us something to do while some of us are just sitting here. Even with attention, it does get monotonous after a while. Let us do some cooking for the fans, even while in costume. Have a Grand Guignol show, or at least an R-rated game show. Getting drunk at the bar may be enough of an incentive for some, but it's not for everyone. Sure beats trying to chase down the organizers for contracted money. They probably dive into it and swim around like they're Scrooge McDuck.

It's been around a half-hour. I might as well take a stroll, and see what I missed. I turn to my assistant.

"I'm going to go look around for a bit and stretch my legs."

Past the rows of guests, their smiles, the pictures being taken, the signatures being signed, all being done in rapid succession, becomes a blur as I go by. Not even a minute and my bladder lets me know how long I've been sitting since breakfast. At least I'm not chained to the table. I can get up when I want. A quick jog, zig-zagging past surprised and sleep-deprived fans, and I find the bathroom. I'm in luck. There's only a short line this time. At least they have the decency not to ask for a picture of autograph now. I've heard of some fans asking for autographs while some guests and stars are at a urinal or in a stall. It's just too rude for words.

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That went quicker than I thought it would. Foot traffic inside is flowing well. I could go back to where I was, and get what I was expecting and what's expected of me, or I could check out what I've been missing. I haven't once looked inside the vendor's room this weekend, there's only one day left, and the clock is ticking.

The sights, voices, and the eyes of the sellers and buyers of the fans' market greet me. Clothes, movies, posters, artwork, and custom-made, hand-crafted figurines are all on display. Even hosts of horror radio programs sit together, watching the people go by, as if they're statues; The occasional word and turning of their heads belay that description. I recognize one of the hosts I was a guest on of which I much enjoyed myself, and head over to meet them. We both deserve to make each other's day.

After arranging to have dinner with them, I continue on my journey, browsing over what catches my eye, and what I don't need. I almost decide to cut it short, but then I hear that little voice of regret, telling me of what could have been, what you could imagine if you miss it. A corner is turned and sure steps are led down to a fate of certain surprise.

A sight greets me which makes me gasps and forget to breathe. It is a sight that neither I, nor I'm sure anyone here, did not expect to see here. A magic act, conjuring the dead to come back to life; an act devious and clever enough, yet easy enough for the adept to appear effortless. Vivid, accurate detail, as if

they were never dead; as if death has ceased to exist.

I don't know how long I was standing there, watching others look at this miracle, while others moved around me. I could do nothing but stare at figures behind velvet rope, fit for the VIPs. People long dead, and those newly dead, stood in various poses. Actors in famous poses; directors gesturing with their arms and hands, looking into the past; serial killers acting out a kill; movie villains ready to steal the show.

My legs seemed to move of their own accord as I ached to study their detail closer. Every inch in clear detail became more apparent, and every second brought a new level of fear. These were not just dummies made of wax or plaster molds. The blemishes, the scars, the moles and beauty marks along with wrinkles and crow's feet…

The eyes. Some look into the past and infinity, some look right at and into the people that go by. Including me. There's no glassy shine to the surface of them with glass eyes. Either there's some sort of new process in making fake eyes for dummies, or those are real eyes.

I don't even notice a person behind me until they're standing beside me, watching the figure of Alfred Hitchcock standing there.

"It's almost as if they're alive. As if they could reach out and touch you."

The fat man walks away as he continues to look at them. I stare at the serial killers; some with a knife in hand, a hammer, or rope that is around their victim's neck. The force in their hands is equal to the force that is in their eyes. That force is palpable. All it would need is a spark of magic to set it ablaze and these bodies would turn their heads, smile, and come at me. A voice of a little boy that used to be me deep inside tries to scream with all his might, begging me to run, but I can't. I have to know. I must know who made these, and how. No ordinary person made these. Not even among those here.

Expressions on their faces threaten to echo in reality; their screams, yells, gurgles, subtle or forceful commands. My eyes follow the faces until they fall upon those of Rasputin. Though he is sitting down, his eyes still project the forceful, glowing power behind them. My head turns and I'm about to walk away to try and ask someone if the artist is available when out of the corner of my eye I notice Rasputin's head move.

Slowly, my heart begins to beat faster. I should beat it out of here and tell myself it's not real; that it's just an elaborate hoax or practical joke. Anyone else would. But, I'm not anyone else. What else would I be doing? Why else am I here?

Back my head goes, along with the rest of my body. Approaching the figure of Rasputin, I study it for signs of life, to try and catch any tell, any clue to see if it was not my imagination playing a trick on me. The eyes that are staring ahead do not move; the face does not twitch an inch; the chest does not rise and fall; the rest of the body does not shift.

A closer, further inspection reiterates this as I stare at him from inches away. He can't be human. No human can sit still for hours without moving an inch, unless they're being paid, or they know some sort of meditation I've never heard of.

My heart threatens to burst out of my chest as his hand shoots out grabs my wrist. Any scream within that tries to escape my throat is drowned. Only the merest squeaks of my gasping breath manages to scratch and claw its way out. The sound of footsteps running away behind me is eclipsed by the blood pounding in my heart. It mixes with the laughter coming from Rasputin as his hand holds on firm.

"Relax, sir. It's all right! You're in good hands. I've been waiting all day to do that."

His eyes smile along with the rest of his face. His hand relaxes slightly as his other hand touches mine.

"I can assure you I'm quite human."

The instant cold sweat that I'm just now feeling begins to break, forming a frost that melts on contact with my organs. The intangibility of my breath within me begins to carry weight again as I'm conscious of it.

"Now that we've gotten that out of the way, let me give you my card."

A card of electric blue, with gold letters written on it, pops into his hand from his robe's sleeve. The letters are raised above the card's surface, and I let my fingers rub their texture as I look at what I find is a single name. "Macabre".

I look back him at man dressed as Rasputin. "Is this your name, or the name of your business?"

"Keep looking."

Below the word, it says “Macabre’s Creations”, and it gives an address and phone number. How convenient. It’s right here in Los Angeles. A part of the city I’ve never been to.

“How come I’ve never seen you at these conventions before?”

“You must not come to these often. Besides, I’ve only started recently. Up until now I’ve only done work under contract, for private collections. You know how it is in the art business…word of mouth. I’ve also had to hone my craft, and you can imagine how long that takes.”

“Naturally.”

“From the way you were looking around earlier, you must have had questions for me. Such as ‘How did I make all these?’, and ‘How did I get such accurate detail?’”

“Well, of course. Who wouldn’t want to know that? A person could rack their brain thinking up all kinds of things.”

“Only if they didn’t know any better. The answer isn’t something that is given out easily; certainly not to those who wouldn’t appreciate the process, either. It is something I’ve taken years perfecting, and closely guarded. I take it you’ve seen statues and wax figures before, but never like these?”

“Never.”

“You would like to know.”

“Yes.”

“How long have you been coming to these events?”

“Long enough.”

“They don’t pay you nearly enough.”

“Right.”

“I’m looking for people to help me in my work. I could pay you at least twice of what any of these conventions could give you. That’s just to start. It beats sitting behind a table, waiting for something to happen while reading a book.”

My mouth opens of its own accord and slowly drops as I think of the book I left in my tote bag being guarded by my assistant.

"But, I don't…"

"I could teach you. It's more fun than you would realize."

I think back to all the art and photography classes I ever took, separating the fun from the agony within my memory.

"I always did enjoy working with my hands."

"When's the last time you did anything like that?"

My memory is searched for an answer, leaving my mouth open, empty without an answer as I look up, down, and away. Looking around as I think back through the years, wondrous delight gets drowned out from drudgery due to insistence over meeting expectations and deadlines.

"That long, huh? It's ok. You don't have to think of me as a boss. Everyone that works with me is their own boss. Whatever they create, they keep their own commission, whatever the buyer pays for it. There are no deadlines. You go at your pace. If you want to quit at any time, you're free to do so. Besides, who wouldn't want to make one of these?"

"Well, I would have loved to have made something like this in art class."

He stands up and puts an arm on my shoulder.

"Why don't we discuss it over dinner?"

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As I sit in the passenger seat of the van, watching cars as we pass them by, I wonder how many of them would follow us or lose concentration if they knew what we were carrying in the back of the van. The smile that shines through Macabre's beard echoes mine as sunlight cascades amidst and past tree and leaves while we look for the home of a retired actor. The further we go, the less of cars we see, either on the road, or parked on the street.

Finding the address of the mansion, we pull in to the driveway, stopping at the gate. He gets out and pushes the button for the intercom. A gravelly voice answers.

"Yeah?"

"Special delivery. You're expecting us."

"Right, right. Come on in."

The gate opens inwards and Macabre gets back into the van. We drive up, past the yard adorned with exotic plants, flowers and water fountains, Greek, Italian statues standing among it all. The smell of the flowers intoxicates us as we see the high walls of the two-story mansion set back acres from the road; from the prying eyes and claws.

Past the house in the garage, I spot a black 1968 Mustang. Just like the one Steve McQueen drove. As we stop the van near the front door, we get out; open the back doors of the van. Crawling in, we grab the bottom of the figure that is covered in a tarpaulin. Carrying the figure out of the van, a stout, heavy-set man with curly, medium-length gray hair, an equally curly bushy mustache, who is wearing a burgundy robe, greets us at the door. I can smell the cigar smoke before I see it puffing away from his mouth and nostrils.

"Marvelous! Marvelous! I trust there was no trouble?"

Macabre turns to look at the man as we make our way to the door.

"Smooth sailing all the way. No bumps, no bruises, no sudden stops. You could have had an unstable bomb in here, and a member of the bomb squad couldn't have driven smoother."

"Oh, ho HO! Now, that's what I like to hear! Bring it in! I can't wait to get a look at this!"

Making our way past the man, his past roles flash across my mind. Various villainous roles, of either futuristic or western nature, but sometimes of centuries past. Many fatherly, and later grandfatherly roles, in family films, dramas, or thrillers, he was able to pick and choose his roles with tender care. I'm sure if he wanted to, he could have been a great singer in any genre of music he wanted; easily in western or opera.

Up the stone steps and past the front door, we step into the wide expanse of the front hall. He follows us in and points the way before we take the time to enjoy the décor.

"This way. In here."

I barely have time to notice the white shag carpeting of the living room as we walk across it. Macabre takes the initiative.

"Where would you like it?"

"In front of the piano."

We maneuver our way past a glass coffee table, careful not to trip over it, and set the covered figure down. As I stand up, I caress my back, thankful for the exercise and experience. The memory of the first time I helped to deliver one of these is easily within reach. Macabre reaches up, pulls off the shroud, and all our attention is rapt at what is revealed.

The man gasps at what he sees. "It's her. My God, it's her. You've done it!"

It is more than a recreation of his wife. Not merely of her likeness. It is past what she was before she died. It is a capture of her youth, her beauty, a moment in time when she was at her most beautiful, her most glorious. From the long, curly black locks of hair, to the deep blue sea of her eyes. It shines from the glow of her skin, to the spark of magic in her eyes.

Thankfully we were allowed to have pictures so we could sculpt her features.

A glittering blue dress covers her thin body with matching shoes that touch a frozen platform of sand. He wanted her just that way, for it was the happiest day of his life, when they were walking on a beach, and he asked her to marry him.

I don't even notice him approaching us as we continue to stare as he wraps us up in a bear hug as he has tears in his eyes.

"Thank you. You've given her back to me."

I can't help but be grateful as we hear his heavy words whisper. I hug him back as Macabre does also. After about half a minute, he relaxes his grip. Tears still stream down his face.

"Let me get you a check. I'm sorry. I'm being a lousy host. Can I get either of you a drink?

I look at Macabre before I answer. "Lemonade, if you have it."

"Today's your lucky day."

We follow him out of the living room, into the foyer, past the stairs leading upstairs and the large chandelier, and into the expansive kitchen with a spacious island. A tall silver refrigerator sits in front of the far wall, and we watch the man open it and pull out a pitcher full of reddish-yellow liquid. Setting it

on the counter, he goes to the cupboard and grabs two crystal glasses.

He pours into one glass, then the other, careful not to spill any.

"I keep this handy in case anyone drops by. It's my own special strawberry/guava/lemonade blend."

We reach for the glasses. "Don't worry. There's no alcohol in it. As they say, you're both on duty." He watches as we sip slowly, savoring the taste, then drinking more of it down as the taste washes through us from the inside-out. He then softly chuckles, blowing air out through his nose.

"Better than anything from a store."

Macabre smacks his lips. "If you sold this at the Farmer's Market, you could make a killing."

"Maybe I should make my own commercial. Now, where was I? Oh, yes, I was getting you a check. Follow me, please."

We follow his out of the kitchen, into the dining room and into a den/library. A mahogany desk sits at the far end, with an oil painting of him wearing a dark suit and a stoic expression on the wall above the desk. Stuffed heads of exotic animals rest on the wall, one right after the other. Rifles, bows and arrows, crossbows, swords also line the wall. African masks and shrunken heads manage to peek out amidst everything.

He goes from behind the desk and pulls out drawers, until he finds his checkbook. Scribbling on it, he hands it to us, and Macabre takes it before I have a chance to.

"This is rather generous! This is more than double the amount we agreed on. Look, I don't know about…"

He looks up from the desk, with large, surprised eyes. "Not enough?"

"No! Its…"

He brings his hand down towards the checkbook again.

"I mean yes!"

"I could always tear that one up and come up with something better."

"No! This is fine! This is more than fine." Macabre hands me the check and I look at the amount. I clasp the glass harder, knowing it's more than anything I could make at any convention.

I look back at him as he looks at us from behind the desk with proud eyes. "Thank you."

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As I watch the burning, orange-red glow on the sunset paint the sky as we drive back to the factory, I think back over the months learning the craft. Learning how to make my first mold, and doing it myself: first a hand, then an arm, a leg, then a whole body. Faces came last; those I was most apprehensive about. Once I got the hang of it, I was allowed to help on sculpting figures. We had to study pictures, from various sources. We were lucky if a spouse or friend lent us pictures to get details accurate. Some were eager to help to the point where they came in themselves and were molded and photographed. There were people coming in who I had not seen in decades. It's been too long, and each of us have been too busy, I swear I forgot someone of them were still alive. When some of them came in, and Macabre didn't tell me who was coming that day, I felt they came back from the dead. Having their likeness immortalized and marketed, they were.

We caught up with each other, and went out to dinner after hours. You know what they say about all work and no play. Sometimes it would be a game of who scared who the most on film, who was scared the most while being filmed, and who made who laugh the most unintentionally. I inadvertently went back to those conventions in the discussion. I asked Macabre if I could design a disguise while showcasing the figures, of which he loved the idea. I'm not part of the main course, so why not. A large snake, with human heads, arms, and legs sticking out of its body, and I get to be part of it, with the red scales being of my skin. Let's just say whenever I moved, hissed, or growled, more than a few people ran.

It made me almost miss the old days where I could discuss my films with scholarly fans, but there isn't enough of them. Not even enough of them online, and now I don't even have the time for that. It's just as well. I was barely making enough at those shows to break even, and sometimes not even that.

The sun sets behind the mountains, leaving behind our little land of make-believe for another day. I don't miss that little part of my life. Most people in the business don't go to them, and it's no wonder. They wouldn't miss it, either. Besides, making these things with my hands…I've never felt as alive as I

do creating them, or having as much fun being part of them.

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The scratch and flaring sound of a matchstick wafts and flows through Macabre's dining room before the smell is noticed. I light tall white candles held by brass candlesticks. The smell hangs in the air, and it is minutes before I smell the food cooking in the loft's kitchen. Lucky for him he lives just above his factory, so whenever inspiration hits him, he can take advantage of it.

A smell I haven't known in decades greets me as he opens the oven, holding a large tray while wearing over mitts. Resting it on the stove, thick steam begins to clear. Any hotter, and he would need a welding mask. Memories flood back before the steam clears of when my mother would make this for me when I was much younger, but for some reason she never gave me the recipe.

The steam evaporates, and the smell matches the memories. Chicken Cacciatore. The peppers, the homemade sauce, the spices…it's all here. I'm eight again, standing in my old home's kitchen after a long day of school or playing with friends, looking up at the curls and apron of my mother, waiting for dinner to be ready.

"Hand me a couple plates. They're in that cupboard over there."

Macabre points to the second to the last one on the right, and I open it. White china plates sit stacked, and I grab two. Placing them on the counter, I then reach into adjacent drawers and grab utensils and napkins, as well as a corkscrew bottle opener for the bottle of red wine that sits on the counter under the cupboard.

Bringing the utensils, and napkins to the oak dinner table, I can hear Macabre putting the food on the plates. I rush back and find two crystal wine glasses in the cupboard, bringing them, the corkscrew, and the bottle. Placing each napkin and utensil on the table, along with each glass, in front of heavy, padded, oak chairs, I proceed to open the wine bottle just as Macabre enters the dining room, with the smell of the food approaching before he does.

Setting down my plate first, then his, I pop the cork, then carefully pour wine into his glass first, which glows in the candlelight. Halfway, and setting his down, I then proceed to pour into mine. Sitting down,

with the past, present and future as a feast.

"So, to what do I owe this dinner?"

"To show my appreciation. It's been one year since we met. In that time we've made how much money?"

"More than a million. At least."

"Not only that, you earned the attention of the right people in the business. You signed contracts for your first films in decades."

"All thanks to you."

"No. To us."

Macabre digs into the food, and I do the same. It is just as I remember it as the flavor hits me. The years fall away, and I'm sitting at the dinner table in my childhood home again. The setting sun shines through the windows in my mind. As I swallow the food, the warmth of it flows through me. We continue to enjoy the food.

"You don't miss being a guest at conventions."

I can't help but smile at the certainty of his words.

"No one else does. I haven't been asked back at any. It's always been me, or someone on my behalf, trying to get on one of the lists."

"If they could see you now."

"Maybe you should recruit more out-of-work actors. Have a workshop at conventions to give people something to do."

"Yeah, but it would take away from them making money from signing autographs and having their picture taken. They can't have that. But, if they only knew how much more money they could make…"

"Now if there were a convention for make-up and special effects artists, and the public did nothing but work with their hands all weekend creating things…I just wish I learned all this in high school. I could have had something more substantial to fall back on."

"Oh, you won't forget your dirty old Godfather now that you have your second pair of wings?"

I smack my lips as I continue to eat. "How could I? I'll continue to help out. Just not as much, and not anytime soon."

Macabre's smile glows in the candlelight along with the rest of his face. "Try the wine. I've been saving it for an occasion such as this."

Taking hold of the glass, I bring it to my nose first, allowing the bouquet to flow down my nose, and then my throat as I breathe it in fully. I try and guess where the wine is from as the smell hits my lungs, but I'm unable to. The rich, heady flavor, the earthy aroma; There's no possibility that any wine like this can come from America.

I bring the glass to my lips, but he stops me.

"Ah ah!"

"What is it?"

"You're forgetting that we should toast first."

"How about to new possibilities?"

Macabre takes hold of his glass.

"I couldn't agree more."

A soft, sharp clash of our glasses, and as I bring the glass back to my lips, the wine hits my tongue, and with a quick taste, it flows down my throat. The rich, full-bodied texture hits me unlike any wine I've ever had, intoxicating me the way blood in the water does for a shark's hunger. Setting the glass down, I dig back into the dinner with new eyes, a fresh tongue, and sharpened teeth.

"You must tell me where you bought this wine."

"Not to worry. You'll know soon enough. By then, you won't have to bother about the cost."

We finish our dinner, and the last of our glasses of wine. Everything perfectly proportioned so we're not stuffed, or drunk. Not even slightly. All balanced. We take the plates, utensils, and glasses back into the kitchen and put them in the dishwasher, activating it, and listening to the hum of it.

A slight grin curls up half of his mouth. "Come. I have a surprise for you."

I follow him out of this kitchen and out the front door of the loft. Down the hall, we reach the staircase

that leads down to his workshop. Down three flights of stairs, we reach the bottom door, and he opens it, leading me into darkness.

A flick of a light switch on the wall near the door, and light flashes alive with blinding, commanding force from on high. I have to cover my eyes due to the low light from the hall, and the candlelight from dinner. If Macabre has any trouble with the light, I'm unable to notice as my eyes take time to adjust. When they do focus, I'm able to see row upon row on unfinished figures in various state sitting or standing next to each other. Some are just arms, legs, feet, or hands. Some are human, while some are not. Mixed with all this are disembodied heads with various expressions on their faces, though some are not fully formed.

A quick glance here and there and I see some faces have menacing looks on their faces. Ravenous, murderous, terrified, while some have cold, solemn looks. We pass all these, and the further we go, the more formed these figures are. All along the evolutionary chart we go.

Heading down one aisle shows humans and their alien parasites from famous science-fiction films. Their tentacles and tendrils curled and spread out, shiny and glowing in the light. Giving the appearance of sleep, but the chance that they could reach out for anyone as we go by. The knowledge and memory of working on some of them takes away the fear, but not the imagination.

Round a corner and another, my heart is suspended from beating as I stop in my tracks. I forget to breathe as I focus on the figures a mere ten feet from me. Macabre comes back into view as he walks back toward me. The touch of his hand on my shoulder brings back my equilibrium.

"Still with me?"

I have to pull my eyes heavily away to look at him.

"How did you…"

"It's a long story. It's something I've been working on in secret; a side project."

My God. No wonder he hasn't told me about this before. Two brothers; serial killers. Their rough, angry, yet boyish, charming faces plastered all over the news. Somehow, they've managed to elude capture. To this day, they have never been found.

"Why them?"

"Because no one else would. Sure, I've made creations of serial killers before…"

"But not of those who are still alive; who are still on the loose. If people see this, can you imagine what people will think?"

"Would it be any different what people think of me now? I've never fit in anywhere! I never could! I never wanted to! Me, an artist, a creator, the misfit of society. I'm supposed to fit in with other misfits, and yet I don't. Most people keep their distance for a reason. They don't want to know why, and don't want to admit it to themselves. Now, is there something else you want to ask me?"

My eyes fall upon their hands. Their thin, yet fleshy hands that have beaten, shot, and strangled many from out of the shadows; granting the untimely judgment of death, destroying what the art of powers beyond human understanding give to the world. Hands that take their time removing what nature is plentiful of, and then disappear, as intangible to catch as smoke.

Smoke, as intangible as the traces of thought of what I could say to him to maybe try and understand; make him feel better, but deep down, I know there isn't anything that I, or anyone, could say that could help. Sometimes, our abilities make us alone in the world, and Macabre is surrounded by them.

"It's a secret. Touch one of them and feel the difference."

I tilt my head as I open my mouth. "Why not." My hand reaches for the right arm for one of them, eager to test the tangibility, malleability that they possess. My fingers caress the bottom of the forearm first, and a sharp spark of instinct makes me recoil slightly. Warmth flowed into the tips of my fingers. That can't be. It has to be some sort of trick; some sort of prank he's pulling. He's probably heating them from some heater I don't know about.

Reaching for the arm again, I touch the top part of the forearm, feeling hair part from my fingers. Not mere warmth comes back, but heat rises to the surface. Moving my fingers down the arm, they reach the wrist. My heart pounds harder as I pray that I don't find what I'm looking for. They press, resting, letting the seconds tick by and build up. As they do, my heart, ever so gently, begins to lessen and give way, relaxing its hold on me. I turn and look into the figure's eyes. Bright light shocks me all at once, giving

way to the figure's dilation of its eyes, and the pulse that has clawed its way from its tomb.

Of its own accord, my hand pulls itself away along with the rest of my body. I am pulled back by a force, a feeling, deep inside myself which I choose not to dwell upon. A mere reflex action as if I received an electric shock or burn. Stumbling back, I bump into other finished figures. One has an arm extended, and their hand grasps onto my shoulder. A quick turn as I feel it, a scream erupts from my bowels, echoing throughout the factory. Legs stumble away of which I feel are mine, powered by lungs of which I remember used to be much relied upon. Eyes which forget to turn away, not seeing arms that grab as my body crashes into his.

"This was done as a personal favor. These boys just got too greedy, and killed the wrong daughter. They would have gotten away with it anyway. A few decades in prison, and let out for good behavior; Or sent to an institution making arts and crafts, high as kites. That's not any kind of justice for what they've been up to. No, this is better. No evidence to bother with; their bodies hiding in plain sight; and they get to see and hear everything. They'll be bought by, shall we say, a generous benefactor. I'm sure they'll feel everything, too, if you know what I mean. Now, I know what you're thinking. But, just think if they killed someone you love. Wouldn't you have the same done to these two?"

Hands clasp and grab my shoulders from behind. The pounding of my heart as it has slowly built to a raging, torrential storm kept me from noticing he was pushing, leading me back, cornered by fate. Words will not come. My mouth; the speech areas of my brain, refuse to work. All I know, all I can see, are his eyes. The depth, warmth of them envelopes me, draws me in, as I begin to fall into them. There is no factory, no world outside, as I feel hands all around me dragging me down into his eyes.

A forgotten spark from my past, from my youth cries out from deep inside, flaring my nerves. Shooting through my body, I rip and tear the hands off my me that are in my mind, and the ones behind. Pushing Macabre away from me as hard as I can, I gasp for breath, taking a lungful in with each step. I don't bother to turn around to see if he hit the floor, or if he's chasing me, or how far away he is. All I can feel is my body running, dodging, past the figures, too exhilarated to bother about them. All I can feel is a spark of pride that is fanned into a fire as I race closer for the exit, back the way I came.

I can feel my chest getting heavy with each breath as I see the door. A door has never looked as inviting or promising as this one does as I pick myself up, dragging, as I sprint towards it. Grabbing the door handle, opening the door in a ripping motion, I quickly flick the light switch off near the door. Pulling the heavy door closed, I lock it behind me, gaining security with the absence of sound from behind the door as I catch my breath. My footsteps go back as I continue to stare at the door. Those seconds feel as if they stretch into minutes as I feel the size of the door grow in my mind, not taking my eyes off it.

Distance pushes me further into acting, and I turn and run past the stairs, down the hall to one of the exits. Pushing open the door, the cool night air greets me as if it's a kiss. The stars, the fresh air, the traffic far off in the distance, and the sounds of people blocks away. I've never wanted to see traffic, even Los Angeles traffic, more.

My electric blue Toyota sits in the distance, to the middle of the building. I pat my pockets for my keys to make sure they're still there, in case Macabre picked my pockets for them. The familiar metal jingling in my left pocket gives a reassuring to my heart as I pick up my feet.

A sharp spasm explodes in my lower back, knocking me down. The suddenness takes my breath away as I collapse to my feet, unable to cry out. A constant throbbing pain pulses. I do everything I can to try to push it aside as I climb back to a standing position. Sweat is forming on my face. I try and take another step, but they're heavier than before. The sight of my car beckons to me, urging me forward.

The small, warm throbbing in my lower back becomes warmer as it spreads itself. All at once, hot tendrils shoot out from within, forming itself within the veins in my skin. Overlapping itself around the cells of my organs, I reach out with my still human hands, as with cement-like feet takes heavier and heavier steps.

It shoots down the veins and arteries of my arms and legs. Drowning the muscles they form over, the bones feel a thin, spongy, cement-like glue cover them, resting between them and the muscles. Another step, and I'm five feet away from the car. I can still feel the keys in my hand as hot tendrils shoot out into my arms. I know they're still my arms as I feel them, but as the seconds go by, I push harder to fight the

strings inside me as my hand shakes, pointing the key at the car door.

Another cement-like step that become heavier with each one, I reach the car. As I put the key in the door's lock, minute filaments shoot up my neck and lock onto my brain, locking each synapse one by one. A snip here and a cut there, I push myself to push the button on my key ring for the car alarm. My hand will not obey. Sounds of people far off in the distance, from a block or two away, a car, people talking loudly, they make my heart beat a faster.

The sounds come closer. The filaments shoot through the chambers of my heart, warming, calming the rhythm. A thin layer of spongy glue forms over it, slowing the beating down just as a spongy layer forms over the lungs, oxygenating them at the cellular level. People come into view. As they walk down the empty street, they don't see me. I am unable to cry out, for no voice will come. As they leave my sight, the fleeting, drowning heartbeat becomes dimmer as it echoes within me until it is a thump, buried, deep underground.

Footsteps form softly behind. Crunching on the pebbles, they get louder and louder until they stop behind me. Hands take the keys from me. A soft, yet sharp pressure from my lower back is released. I can feel a dart being removed. I don't feel his hands on me as I am carried back inside.

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Bright lights from a high ceiling shine down on an unsuspecting crowd. One moves while the other does not. They stare at us, eager to touch us, but respectful to keep their distance. Some disobey and step over the velvet rope. A stray arm from a human or medusa, or alien tentacle, or maybe even a tree branch, reaches out and grabs whoever happens to get too curious. They pull and struggle, and run, no matter how old they are.

A new crowd comes along, and it begins again. Their eyes probe and prod as they study the figures; the whispers form a spark that is fanned into a small fire. Always, their eyes fall upon me, and they can't help but wonder. Wonder whatever happened to me; if I'm alive or not. They stare into my eyes, and as they do, I can't help but feel their doubt. But, young and old alike, there's always one that says the same thing: "It's as if their alive; as if they could reach out and touch you."